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## **LARSON REINTRODUCES LEGISLATION TO IMPROVE VETERAN'S ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE**

HARTFORD- U.S. Congressman John B. Larson (CT-01) reintroduced bipartisan legislation in the House of Representatives designed to improve access to healthcare for America's veterans. The bill, entitled the 21st Century Veterans Equitable Treatment Act (VET-21), would ensure adequate healthcare access by setting standards for appointments using the Veteran's Administration's (VA) established performance goals. If the VA is incapable of meeting these standards, Larson's legislation would allow treatment of veterans at a non-VA medical facility for service or treatment for which they would have otherwise qualified within the VA system. The legislation currently has a bipartisan group of 16 original cosponsors.

Larson stated: "Enrollment in VA healthcare has more than doubled since 1995 and many veterans are experiencing unacceptable waiting periods for medical appointments. America owes an incredible debt of gratitude to our veterans, who were promised lifetime healthcare benefits as well as a healthcare network to meet their needs. The federal government has an obligation to keep its promise, and this legislation would guarantee a safety net of adequate and uninterrupted healthcare for veterans in those instances when the VA is unable to provide acceptable service. It considers first and foremost the immediate needs of individual veterans without undermining existing VA services or facilities," said Larson.

To expedite reimbursements for services and reduce the need for complicated paperwork, VET-21 would recommend that the VA Secretary take advantage of tools such as "Smart Card" technology, that would allow claims, including those for emergency service, to be processed electronically. The legislation would also remove the requirement that for non-VA emergency services, a veteran must have seen a VA doctor within the last 24 months and would include a standard for assessing improvement in appointment waiting times. The bill also directs the Secretary to submit quarterly reports on the reduction in waiting times and appointment delays in the system to the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

The legislation, which Larson first introduced last year in the 107th Congress, is based on concerns voiced at a forum held in Newington with local veterans in February 2002 to discuss the VA New England regional budget deficit and the movement of specialty care services from the Newington VA facility to the West Haven facility.

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*Congressman Larson is a Member of the House Armed Services Committee*